Fowl Feathered Review

№185

Issue № 185: The Alarming Prevalence of People Who Say "Bless Your Heart."

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

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Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

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"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

FURY

By Mariane Chadwick

Tableau One: The Seed of an Idea (Glitch Origin)

The crotch rocket's hum,
A turtle's fractured shell,
Then, silent pine.

The Veazie air, thick with the scent of damp asphalt and distant pine, clung to the world like a shroud. Twelve-year-old Shrimp Dip stood by the roadside, his self-adhesive handlebar mustache twitching in sync with the miniature roar of the crotch rocket. Beside him, Trash Boat, monocle gleaming like a polished shard of the bruised sky, adjusted the purloined leather jacket, his focus a laser beam on the vibrations humming through the handlebars. The air itself seemed to hold its breath, as if the very pines whispered secrets of frictionless motion, their needles a chorus of ancient, forgotten dialects.

Shrimp Dip's mind, a labyrinth of visual data, fixated on the exact shade of green moss on a roadside rock. It was not just green—it was the green of forgotten forests, of mold on forgotten bread, of the first spring leaf after a long winter. His gaze, a microscope of precision, cross-referenced it with a memory of a vibrantly illustrated picture book on forest ecosystems, each hue a data point in an infinite, ordered system. Yet, this clarity blurred human emotion, rendering social cues as unintelligible as the swirling patterns in a kaleidoscope.

Trash Boat, meanwhile, was a conductor of frequencies, his internal orchestra tuning to the vibrations of the bike. "Coefficient of drag is suboptimal at this velocity," he intoned,

his voice a low thrum, as if the laws of physics were a liturgy he alone could recite. His monocle caught the light, refracting it into a prism of possibilities, each one a theorem waiting to be proven.

A flicker at the curb. Trash Boat's periphery, unusually keen for environmental anomalies, drew him. He decelerated, his monocle glinting. "Irregular biotic presence at 3 o'clock." The language of his internal observations slipped into the world, a code only he could decipher.

It was a three-legged Eastern painted turtle, its shell a fractured map of survival. Shrimp Dip's gaze locked onto the missing limb, his mind rapidly constructing a three-dimensional skeletal model, predicting the biomechanical shifts for locomotion. He considered limb regeneration in amphibians, recalling a biology textbook's details on salamander caudal autotomy, wondering if turtles possessed a similar, remarkable capacity.

"Its gait will be compromised," Shrimp Dip stated, his voice a clinical echo in the damp air. "The distribution of mass... the compensatory muscular development will be asymmetric." His words hung like a diagnosis, a prophecy carved into the asphalt.

Trash Boat, already dismounted, cradled the creature as if it were a relic from a lost civilization. "Conservation of life is a primary directive," he declared, his conviction unyielding, as robust as the laws of the playground. He named it Fury, a small, green anchor in a sea of uncertainty.

Tableau Two: The Heart of the Conflict/Emotion (Glitch Nexus)

The turtle's fractured shell,
A whisper of Krylon paint,
Then, silent rage.

The pet shop hummed with competing scents and riotous color, a cacophony of life trapped in glass and wire. Trash Boat navigated it with the precision of a field biologist, his monocle scanning the shelves like a microscope. Shrimp Dip, however, was lost in a tank of exotic fish, their iridescent scales a kaleidoscope of shifting spectral hues. Each fish was a prism, a fragment of light trapped in flesh, and he categorized them by light-refracting properties, the outside world fading to a dull murmur.

Then, Saratoga appeared, a flash of blue hair and pierced eyelids, pushing a baby carriage with a freshly washed poodle nestled inside. Her gaze, direct and confident, registered to Trash Boat as an intriguing deviation from typical human interaction. “You guys look like walking canvases,” she said, a smile playing at her lips. “I want to paint you.”

Shrimp Dip, jolted from his chromatic reclassification, stared blankly, his mustache tilting. He didn’t grasp the social implication, the casual intimacy. His mind was still processing angelfish spectral properties. Trash Boat, however, saw opportunity—a unique data point in human artistic expression and its potential for personal camouflage.

Behind the store, they stripped to their undies. Saratoga’s confident strokes applied Krylon changing-color paint, each spray a burst of possibility. Shrimp Dip found the cool mist fascinating, his skin reacting with minute, measurable tremors he filed as new tactile data. He observed the paint’s shifting hues under varying light, instantly analyzing molecular pigment structure and light absorption, like a miniature physicist.

Trash Boat, ever the analytical observer, noted the precise pressure of her brush, the trajectory of her arm, mentally recording the ergonomics of artistic application. He theorized about the optimal spray angle for even coating, potentially useful for rapid disruptive patterning.

The click of the instant camera recorded the moment, a snapshot of fractured reality. Saratoga demanded fifty dollars. Trash Boat accessed his mental ledger. Empty. “Our current fiscal liquidity is demonstrably insufficient for the proposed exchange,” he stated, his monocle unwavering, devoid of embarrassment. Shrimp Dip, whose

understanding of money was tenuous, simply looked blank. For him, value was inherent, not arbitrary.

“Then Fury it is,” Saratoga declared, scooping up the turtle. Trash Boat, though he registered the loss of the biological specimen, reclassified the event as a data exchange, a non-monetary transaction of equivalent value, maintaining a logical consistency in his understanding.

Tableau Three: The Echo or Aftermath (Glitch Resonance)

The paint’s shifting hues,
A whisper of lost youth,
Then, silent snow.

The night unfolded on the rooftop, under a sky teeming with cosmic brilliance. Trash Boat, fueled by caffeinated energy drinks, lectured on celestial navigation, his voice a rhythmic cadence against the infinite. Understanding these mechanics was a prerequisite for comprehending all terrestrial phenomena; the stars, a vast, complex algorithm he was determined to crack.

Shrimp Dip, on the other hand, was absorbed in the cupcakes, meticulously dissecting each, separating frosting from cake with surgical precision. He examined the sugar’s crystalline structure, the batter’s aeration, seeing in each crumb a miniature, edible architecture, a testament to the elegant simplicity of chemical reactions.

As dawn bled across the sky, Trash Boat, lost in a caffeine-induced fugue about comets, misjudged his footing. His mustache slipped, and he plummeted off the roof, landing with a muffled thud in an open truck bed filled with junk. The impact, he noted with dispassionate clarity, registered as blunt force trauma, a predictable outcome of unmitigated gravitational acceleration.

At the hospital, sterile white walls, the pervasive scent of antiseptic. Shrimp Dip, cataloging the institutional white, cross-referenced it with a 19th-century optical illusion chart. Trash Boat, examined and crutch-bound, held Fury's carton with a grip born of absolute conviction. The bus station. Portland, Oregon. The logical next step in an unpredictable, yet ultimately navigable, universe.

The air was heavy with impending snow, the silence almost oppressive. A single crimson paint stain, a remnant of Saratoga's Krylon, lingered on the rooftop railing, a silent echo of the night's events. The world, fractured and reassembled, continued its eternal waltz, each moment a tableau vivant, a living, breathing spectacle of glitched reality.

The Opalescent Phantasmagoria of Key West: A Poultry Polylogue

By Hayden Simmons.

A Meditation on the Feral and the Fatuous.

1. Prolegomena to the Avian Anomaly. The Humid Genesis.

"Shortnin' Bread," a Scent of Salt and Decay.

In the humid embrace, a thick, cloying miasma, of the Florida Keys, where the sun, an incandescent orb of fiery fervor, did not merely kiss the horizon but rather, with an ancient, almost primordial intent, devoured it, Key West stood, not as a steadfast edifice, but as a tremulous, precarious bastion of eccentricity, its very foundations seemingly laid upon the shifting sands of an ongoing, ceaseless absurdity. Its streets, narrow conduits of asphalt and crumbling coral, did not simply hold secrets but whispered them, a perpetual, low hiss of pastel-hued facades and wrought-iron balconies, which, in turn, echoed with the clack of heels, a rhythmic, unsettling counterpoint to the distant murmur of conspiracy that

seemed to emanate not from clandestine meetings but from the very air itself. Here, in this improbable terminus, the atmosphere hung heavy, viscous, with the scent of saltwater, iodine, and the faint, unsettling perfume of illusions, a pervasive, almost palpable vapor of paradise, where reality, a concept as malleable as the very tides, danced, a grotesque, unsettling waltz, with the absurd.

A Homeless Beach Bum, a figure sculpted by the relentless wind and the indifferent sun, his eyes, like the polished fragments of sea glass, fixed on the shifting, perpetually reconfiguring sands, spoke. This island, he rasped, his voice a dry, grating sound, like shells dragged across concrete, it's a dream on borrowed time, you see. The ocean, she breathes, an immense, indifferent lung, pulls back, always, revealing what's always been beneath, the detritus, the truth. Just like this town, always showing you the shiny surface, a shimmering veneer, but the truth, the true, irreducible truth, it's down there, buried in the grit and the tide, in the unexamined refuse. We, the flotsam, the forgotten, we know this. We are the shoreline's conscience, perpetually eroded, perpetually present, a testament to the sea's indifferent honesty.

11. The Feathered Multitude: An Unbidden Chorus. A Semiotic Overload.

"Old Joe Clark," and the Dominion of Dust.

Amidst this tableau of tropical decay, a landscape both vibrant and subtly decomposing, a motley congregation of fowl, a chaotic, feathered multitude, had claimed dominion, not through conquest or decree, but through sheer, unyielding presence. They strutted with the self-important confidence of kings, their iridescent plumage catching the fickle light, each movement a pronouncement; they clucked with the gnomic wisdom of sages, their guttural utterances seeming to contain vast, uninterpretable truths; and they fluttered with the disorienting grace of debutantes in a world unseen, a hidden ballet performed on the cracked pavement. Their very existence, a bewildering testament to survival and an almost terrifying adaptability, these creatures of plume and claw had, with an unthinking, relentless will, transformed the city, this intricate, human-designed labyrinth, into their own gallinaceous gallimaufry, a sprawling, clucking, iridescent monument to their feral autonomy.

A Chicken, its head tilting with an ancient, reptilian wisdom, pecking at a discarded conch shell, a fragment of ocean past, muttered a low,

percussive sound. They think they own this pavement, it seemed to say, these two-legged giants, these architects of fleeting order. But we are the true inheritors of the dust. We peck at their fallen crumbs, the discarded remnants of their transient abundance, and in those crumbs, those minute, edible truths, we find the truth of their fleeting empires, their ephemeral dominion. Their concrete is our stage, their neglect, our freedom. The asphalt, that hard, unyielding surface, it remembers the heat of the sun, yes, but it forgets the fertile decay of the earth, the rich, microbial generosity. We are the earth's memory here, a living, clucking archive of what was and what persists.

III. Chronology of Clucking: A Palimpsest. The Ancestral Tap.

"Froggie Went A-Courtin'," But the Chickens Remember.

From the shadows of history, from the forgotten corners of former sustenance, the feral chickens had emerged, not as an invasion, but as a slow, inexorable return, a spectral presence. Descendants of domesticated ancestors who had, by some caprice of fate or sudden, desperate flight, escaped the culinary fate that invariably awaited them, they had evolved, not into something new, but into something profoundly ancient, something more elemental.

Their ancestry, a rich, bewildering tapestry of breeds—the stoic Barred Plymouth Rock, the fiery Rhode Island Red, the elegant Leghorn—now a blending of feathers and furor, a genetic palimpsest, that painted the town in their own vibrant, unsettling palette, each bird a living testament to an ongoing, unwritten saga.

An Unborn Chick, suspended within the fragile, calcified cosmos of its egg, emitted a faint, insistent tap, a nascent consciousness stirring within the albumen. I hear the rumble of their ancient steps, it seemed to communicate, a vibrational memory, the clucking of ancestors who knew fields, knew the softness of real soil, not this grinding asphalt. My world, for now, is this shell, a fragile, calcified cosmos, a temporary containment. But their history, that long, unbroken line of survival, that is my future. Will I scratch in dirt, feeling the cool, dark earth beneath my nascent claws, or will I navigate the metallic gleam of their monstrous carriages, their roaring, destructive machines? The shell holds the question, a spherical paradox, a miniature, existential dilemma. But the blood remembers, a primal echo, a deep, resonant hum in my forming being.

IV. A Bestiary of Galline Glory. The Self-Important Spectacle.

"Cripple Creek," and the Rooster's Imperious Cry.

The roosters, those strutting, preening patriarchs, executed their baroque promenade with a pomposity that utterly belied their humble, often ignoble, origins. Their iridescent tails, a fanfare of color, a shimmering, living banner, swayed to the rhythm of their own self-importance, each feather a tiny, iridescent prism of their colossal ego. They ruled the roosts of Key West's back alleys, the hidden, malodorous channels, and the sun-baked sidewalks, their crows, piercing the early morning air, not merely with a sound but with a sonorous symphony of self-adulation, a triumphant, almost tyrannical declaration.

A Rooster, mid-crow, its chest puffed, a fleshy, feathered drum. A rasping pronouncement, born of ancient instinct. Hear me! he shrieked, his voice tearing at the fabric of their sleep, ripping open the very canvas of the night. They resent it, these soft creatures who slumber while the world is born anew with each sunrise, while the light, a brutal, unforgiving truth, floods the world. But my cry is a declaration of existence, a challenge to the encroaching silence, the quiet death of oblivion. I am the herald, the sun's own feathered

prophet! A solitary voice against the encroaching tide of oblivion, a defiant, feathered defiance against the endless, indifferent universe. And in the forgotten corners of their minds, deep beneath the dust and the heat, these chickens, those who had seen too much, tasted too many chemicals from discarded human waste, began to lose their minds. A psychogenic rabidity, born of environmental trauma. They would feign flight, a spasmodic fluttering, eyes vacant, a desperate, pathetic mimicry of true avian grace. Their wings, built for brief bursts, now flapped in a mad, hopeless mime, a terrifying, beautiful madness.

V. The Hen's Maternal Miasma. An Archipelago of Downy Dependence.

"Turkey in the Straw," and the Primordial Urges.

The hens, in their nurturing embrace, a ceaseless, clucking vigilance, formed a bastion of life amidst the concrete sprawl, a tender, fragile island of existence in a sea of indifferent human construction. Their clucks, a complex, almost melodic system of communication, were the siren calls of survival, beckoning chicks to the warmth of their feathered sanctuaries, hidden from the prying eyes of predators, both avian and human.

A Hen, nestled with her chicks, a low cluck, a sigh of ancient wisdom, a sound as old as the first egg. This asphalt, she whispered, it remembers the heat of the sun, yes, but it forgets the softness of the earth, the cool, forgiving loam. We lay our hopes here, brittle and fragile, these small, perfect spheres. Every peck is a prayer, a tiny, fervent plea, every wing-spread a shield against the endless hunger of the world, against the talons that descend unseen. They build their tall boxes, their sterile monuments, their temporary dwellings. But we build life, one fragile heartbeat at a time. A persistent pulse against the indifferent stone, a relentless throb of being.

Their broods grew, a riot of feathers and squawks, a living embodiment of the city's diverse, chaotic spirit. They flitted. Fluttered. A whirlwind of activity that danced around the ankles of unsuspecting tourists, a living caricature of the chaos that thrived beneath the city's veneer, a small, feathered chaos mirroring the larger, human one.

VI. The Vanishing Point of Capture. The Shadowy Silhouette.

"Cotton-Eyed Joe," and the Agent of Order, or Absurdity?

A figure emerged from the shadows, a silhouette of intent, of grim determination. The town's collector of the unruly, he sought to impose order on the feathered fray, this anarchic poultry. His methods, a blend of stealth and strategy, a quiet choreography, comprised a dance as ancient as the city itself, a futile, necessary ritual.

The Sheriff, watching the collector from a distance, his hand resting on his holster, a cynical drawl escaping his lips. Order. That's the word they use. A word, like a net, cast over the wild. But what is order in a place like this? We chase chickens while the real chaos brews under the surface, in the hearts of men, in the unsaid thoughts, the unspoken desires. This town, it’s like a cracked mirror, reflecting a million small truths, none of them whole, none of them complete. He’s just trying to sweep up the shards, a futile gesture against the infinite shattering, against the relentless entropy.

VII. The Sisyphean Task of Population Control. The Lament.

"Bury Me Beneath the Willow," and the Silence That Never Came.

His heart torn between love for these creatures, a strange, inexplicable tenderness, and the perceived need to contain their sprawling, irrepressible numbers. Each capture, a silent battle between man and beast, a brief, desperate struggle echoed in the whispers of the chickens' ancestral spirits, a primal lamentations.

Yet, for every bird caught, a dozen more took flight, or rather, simply appeared, a constant, baffling replenishment. The cacophony of their existence, a perpetual, clucking thrum, was a constant reminder that the city's peace, its supposed tranquility, was as fleeting as the feathers they shed, caught on the humid breeze.

A Municipal Worker, wiping sweat from his brow, his net, a symbol of his Sisyphean burden, slung over his shoulder. A weary monotone, born of repetitive futility. They call it 'control.' he murmured. Like you can control the tide, or the wind, or the very breath of the universe. These birds, they're the soul of this island, perhaps its fever dream, its enduring delusion. We chase them, they scatter, a shower of feathers and fleeting shadows, and the sun rises again on the same

old squawk. It's an endless dance, a meaningless ballet of pursuit and evasion. And I? I am just the poor sap with the net. A cosmic joke, really, perpetrated by a silent, indifferent cosmos.

VIII. The Codified Comedown. The Lexicon of Limitation.

"Oh Susannah," and the Bureaucratic Rationale.

The town's edicts, inscribed on weathered signs, were clear: to feed was to fuel the chaos, to participate in the burgeoning anarchy. Signs, a linguistic labyrinth of prohibitions, were scattered like breadcrumbs, ironic fragments of forbidden sustenance, forbidding the very sustenance that sustained their clucking canticles, their continuous, irritating melody.

Complaints grew louder than the roosters' calls, a crescendo of human displeasure that threatened to drown out the chickens' symphony, their relentless ode to freedom.

Fear of filth and disease, a phantom menace more potent than reality, cast a pall over the town. The chickens' presence, a blight on the pristine paradise that tourists sought, a blemish on the curated illusion.

Yet, in the quiet corners of the city, where the asphalt softened and the air grew thick with forgotten scents, a counter-narrative whispered. Stories of the chickens' healing powers, their feathers a balm to the soul, their presence a tonic to the spirit, a connection to something wild and untamed.

The Mayor, at a podium, adjusting his tie, a gesture of almost desperate civility. His voice, oily with conviction, smooth as polished glass. We strive for balance, he declared, for the common good, for the optimal tourist experience. Tourists come here for the beauty, the quaint charm, not for... for a barnyard. It's about public health, a civic duty, about maintaining the image, the carefully constructed facade. Some things, no matter how 'quaint,' simply do not belong in a modern resort community. It's a matter of principle, of progress. A necessary excision for the greater aesthetic, a surgical removal of the inconvenient truth.

IX. The Sanctuary of Second Chances. A Temporary Holding.

"Wayfaring Stranger," and the Community's Cage.

A place of refuge emerged. A sanctuary of wire and hope. Here, the chickens found respite from the concrete jungle. Their beaks pecking at the dirt. Dreaming of greener pastures.

Their enclosures, a testament to human ingenuity, born of desperation, were repurposed cages, fences, and coops that whispered of the ephemeral nature of freedom, of its constant negotiation.

Other creatures, drawn by the siren song of the chickens, by the very presence of life, sought refuge in this bastion of the unexpected. The sanctuary grew. A Noah's Ark of the unwanted, a temporary haven for the world's discarded.

X. The Pastoral Pilgrimage. A New Dawn.

"Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms," and the Nomadic Existence.

The fields, once a canvas of sugarcane and tropical fruit, now bore witness to the chickens' dance of survival. They pecked. Scratched. A ballet of hunger and resilience, a ceaseless, rhythmic pursuit of sustenance.

Their lives became a cycle of movement and rest. A testament to the perpetual dance of life itself. As they roamed the fields, leaving in their wake a trail of fertility and new beginnings.

XI. Peripheral Visions and Accidental Edens. The Ark of the Ailing.

"Down in the Valley," and Other Fragments of Fauna.

In the sanctuary's shadow, other creatures gathered. Injured. Lost. Forgotten. They formed a coalition of the dispossessed. Each finding refuge in the chickens' strange dominion.

The cages transformed into a living, breathing tableau of salvation. Vines grew through the bars. Flowers bloomed from the earth. The walls of wire sang with the whispers of redemption.

XII. The Botanical Bastion of the Tower. A Tranquil Tableau.

"House of the Rising Sun," and Echoes of Conflict.

In the heart of the city, a tower stood sentinel. Its balconies a verdant tapestry of plants and plumes. It whispered of a peaceful coexistence between man and bird.

Yet within its ivy-covered embrace, the ghosts of battles fought and won. The echoes of squawks and human shouts. Reverberated through the leaves. A reminder of the precarious balance of life.

XIII. The Nocturnal Narratives and the Cult of the Celebrated Chicken. The Invisible Empire.

"Midnight Special," and Secret Citadels.

When darkness fell, a velvety shroud descending upon the eccentric island, the chickens retreated to their hidden realms, their clandestine strongholds. Their secret citadels nestled within the city's green spaces, a labyrinthine maze of ancient roots and shadowed foliage. They became the silent guardians of the night. Their movements a rustle in the undergrowth. Their presence a soft, reassuring hum in the otherwise hushed city, a counterpoint to the distant hum of unseen generators. These nocturnal narratives, unseen by most, understood by few, spoke of a hidden world, a parallel existence where the chickens were not just birds, but the very pulse of Key West's wild heart, its untamed, chaotic essence. The unseen currents of an absurd, beautiful existence, forever flowing beneath the polished surface.

The janitor moved across the floor of the void, his push broom of bound starlight making no sound on the obsidian surface. His boot sole made contact with a hard edge. A network of fractures radiated from the point of impact through what was once a vase the color of a forgotten sky. The pressure of his boot sole, dragging the fragments deliberately, produced a sustained, high-frequency sound—a shrill, glassy shriek of protest. In response, a series of tuned percussive tones—metallic, resonant—originated from an unseen source, layering a gamelan-like structure over the grating noise, an impromptu and dissonant cosmic symphony. He paused, regarding the damage not with dismay, but with the quiet appraisal of a craftsman.

Scraaaape! The push broom's bristles bit into the glassy detritus, a harsh whisper of cosmic housekeeping. A memory, sharp as a shard of cobalt blue, surfaced of a… shattered promise, ground to dust under the janitor's methodical heel. He gathered the luminous fragments into a pan, a shattered rainbow scooped from the dark, a constellation of…

A clock with no face wept gears onto a carpet of silent moths. The air held the taste of ozone and unspoken apologies, a low hum that was the color of old brass. potential sorrows and misremembered laughter. The janitor transferred the shards into an open-faced white box. He worked without expression, a functionary assembling a paradox. A tube of adhesive was applied. A miniature Formica table, a terracotta pot, two figures. The box was placed on the shelf, its internal light beginning to glow…

The Persistent Hum of Unripe Berries & Two-Mouthed Truths from Beyond the Noshery

By Omero Hostwitz

Imagine a vast, silent cosmic shelf, stretching into an unseen void. Upon it, miniature worlds glow with an internal light, each a moment frozen, yet pulsating with fragmented truths.

Diorama One: The Late Bite's Pale Glow

Here, a precisely crafted tableau of "The Late Bite" hums under a tiny, indifferent sun. The Formica table, rendered with microscopic stickiness, captures the ghosts of a thousand breakfasts. Agnes, a delicate figure in middle age, sits with the quiet relief of someone recently unburdened by invasive flora. Her hands, tiny knuckles prominent, rest beside a terracotta pot. Inside, a strawberry plant, its miniature leaves unnaturally still. You can almost feel the faint shimmer of residual surgical tape adhesive on Agnes's skin, catching the harsh overhead light. The air, though contained within this tiny scene, smells of fried onions and stale coffee. A single, slightly-too-yellow slice of cake sits on a chipped plate. And there, emerging from the diner's muted tones, is Arthur, a meticulously sculpted waiter with two distinct mouths, one above the other, holding a miniature pot of coffee. The tableau seems to vibrate with their whispered, conflicting dialogue: "Fresh brew," from the upper mouth, a practiced smile; "It's the bottom of the pot. Been there since ten," from the lower. The strawberry's unripe berry hangs heavy, a silent counterpoint to their paradoxical conversation about sentience and the nature of Hackettstown's "miasma" versus "grease smoke." This scene is a fixed point, yet the interplay of their voices creates a swirling vortex, hinting at choices made and journeys begun.

Diorama Two: The Highway's Quiet Promise

Further along the cosmic shelf, the diner diorama shrinks, replaced by a scene of quiet departure. An old car, its dents and faded paint minutely detailed, rests on the shoulder of a miniature highway stretching towards a painted horizon. The air here, though unseen, suggests the scent of pine and damp earth. Agnes stands, a tiny, practical figure, cradling the strawberry plant (now clearly labeled 'Phil' in a minuscule inscription on its pot) like a fragile infant. Arthur is beside her, one hand resting on the car door, his two mouths momentarily still, gazing at the road ahead. Sunlight, painstakingly filtered through miniature roadside trees, stripes their figures with shifting patterns of light and shadow. Near their feet, a minuscule, crumpled map or a dropped glove lies forgotten, a testament to the abruptness of their decision. This diorama hums with a different silence than the diner's; it is vast, promising, and slightly overwhelming, a perfect pause before the next shift in their peculiar reality. The fixed gaze of Arthur's two sets of eyes, unified for a moment, implies a collective, if ambiguous, decision to leave.

Diorama Three: The Pond's Reflective Stillness

The highway scene recedes, giving way to a tranquil diorama of Central Penjajawoc Preserve, Maine. A small, slightly dilapidated cabin is nestled by a miniature pond, its surface a perfect, rippled mirror reflecting a painted grey sky and dark silhouettes of trees. Three figures are arranged by the water's edge. Agnes sits on a fallen log, her gaze distant, fixed on a tiny, perfectly rendered duck moving across the pond. Phil, the strawberry plant, is carefully placed on the ground beside her, its leaves catching the late afternoon sun, perhaps a new, tentative leaf just unfurling. Arthur stands slightly behind them, hands in his pockets, one mouth perhaps slightly open, the other still. A few stray, almost imperceptible feathers float near the miniature bank. Here, the only sounds are the distant, imagined calls of birds and the soft lap of water. Time feels suspended, measured only by the slow, deliberate movement of the ducks. The conversations here are more subdued, focused solely on waterfowl – the upper mouth's declarations of "majestic preening" countered by the lower mouth's blunt "Scratchin' an itch." Mundane objects—a smooth stone, a feather, a bottle cap—appear, held by Arthur, each sparking its own brief, conflicting history. This diorama, more than the others, blurs the line between memory and invention, making us

question the very nature of Arthur's duality and Phil's past sentience. No grand epiphany is visible, only the quiet, endless observation, the compelling, debatable reality of the ducks. And across the cosmic shelf, the light from the diner's neon sign still flickers, a persistent, distant hum, connecting these disparate moments in an unseen, fragmented narrative.

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THE GREAT MIGRATION: A BIOCHEMIST'S QUEST FOR NASAL NIRVANA

By Penelope Louisa Daalman

Dr. Aris Thorne lived and breathed the air, or, more accurately, he lived to breathe the intricate, often baffling, world of nasal passages. His life's opus was the nasal spray, a humble yet profound delivery system he believed held the key to unlocking hidden dimensions of human perception. Now, he found himself on the grandest, most peculiar stage imaginable: the Holiday Inn from Chicago, a monument to suburban hospitality now mobile, perched precariously atop thirty interconnected Liebherr T 282 series mining trucks. This colossal, rumbling behemoth was the "Great Migration," and it traversed an endless, indifferent landscape, its destination a mystery even to its operators.

1. The Mobile Monument: A Rolling Residue

The Holiday Inn, surprisingly intact down to its flickering neon sign, looked utterly out of place as it churned across vast salt flats, then through whispering forests of crystalline structures, only to emerge onto plains of obsidian. Its once-stationary existence had been replaced by a ceaseless, grinding journey. The very air within its walls hummed with the residue of function: the faint, phantom scent of chlorine from an absent pool, the ghost of elevator music, the subtle, almost imperceptible "echo" of check-ins and check-outs, and the persistent, almost taunting promise of complimentary breakfast.

Dr. Thorne, a man of precise movements and even more precise theories, moved through this rolling edifice with the quiet dedication of a sommelier evaluating a rare vintage. His official mission was mundane—air quality. His true purpose, however, was sublime: to harness the unique atmospheric conditions of this perpetually shifting environment. He believed the hotel's lingering "essences" and the constantly changing "airscapes" outside held the formula for the ultimate nasal solution, for what he reverently called "nasal nirvana."

"The nose knows," he would often mutter to himself, adjusting his spectacles with a practiced flick of his index finger. "And what it knows, I shall bottle."

His toolkit, acquired through painstaking (and sometimes dubious) online auctions, was as unconventional as his research. His upright vacuum wasn't for dust but for "sampling" atmospheric particulates and the unseen, ambient "dust" of lost functions. It emitted a low, continuous thrum like a monastic chant.

His colander, surprisingly effective, served to "sieve" and "filter" ambient energies and subtle currents of the moving air, catching conceptual "flakes" he couldn't otherwise perceive. For microscopic "scent-signatures" and minute "membranes of regret" from forgotten corners, he wielded a pair of tweezers from eBay that had once, according to the listing, "belonged to a Swiss watchmaker with synesthesia."

But his most paradoxical instrument was his Garvey gun. With it, he assigned arbitrary "values" to the ephemeral concepts and emotional residues he encountered, clicking price stickers onto invisible phenomena—an attempt to quantify the unquantifiable, each click a silent judgment. "Melancholy of the ice machine: $2.49." "Anticipation of hot shower: $7.99." "Disappointment of thin walls: $0.79 (clearance)."

II. Vignettes of Nasal Nuance: The Atmospherics of Purpose

A. The Lobby's Lingering Limen

The Holiday Inn lobby was a study in perpetual transition. Here, Dr. Thorne detected the faint, metallic tang of keys turning, the ghost of distant murmurs, and the subtle "aroma" of a thousand arrivals and departures. It was, he noted in his journal (bound in the leather of an extinct animal that had never existed), "the olfactory equivalent of a run-on sentence."

"Fascinating," he murmured, as he vacuumed a patch of air near the former check-in desk. "The ozone of expectation mingles with the musk of forgotten itineraries. What we have here is a veritable bouquet of transience."

He poured the collected invisible contents through his colander, watching intently as nothing visibly happened. Yet to his trained senses, the "residue of choice" was filtering through, leaving behind the cruder elements of mere existence.

A phantom bellhop cart rolled by, its spectral wheels making no sound on the patterned carpet. Dr. Thorne barely glanced up; such manifestations were common in the mobile monument. Instead, he

focused on the lingering, slightly sweet scent of "unfulfilled welcomes" hovering near the non-existent front desk.

With his Garvey gun, he tagged a particularly poignant waft: "Unmade Decision: $3.75."
"A bargain," he declared to no one in particular. "In Düsseldorf, such indecision would fetch no less than five euros."

B. The Breakfast Bar's Perennial Promise

The empty breakfast bar was, to Dr. Thorne, a symphony of phantom nourishment. The air here was heavy with the "ghost" of stale coffee, the spectral sizzle of bacon that would never crisp, and the cloying "aroma" of processed pastries that would never be consumed. It was, in his assessment, "the stench of perpetual readiness"—a concept so profound he had to sit down briefly on a non-existent stool.
With meticulous care, he tweezed out minute, almost invisible "crumbs of unconsumed hope" from the air above the waffle maker. Each extraction was delicate, requiring the precision of a neurosurgeon and the patience of a geological formation.

"The beauty," he explained to a dust mote passing by, "lies in the anticipation that shall never be fulfilled. The waffle that shall never be pressed, the syrup that shall never be poured, the satisfaction that

shall never be felt. It is, in essence, the purest form of hospitality—promised but never tested."

He tagged a particularly rich waft of "unfulfilled nourishment" with his Garvey gun: "$0.99, clearance."

"A shame," he sighed. "But market forces wait for no biochemist."

As he worked, the ghostly imprint of a child's sticky hand appeared on a glass partition, only to fade like breath on a mirror. The overwhelming "smell" of endless buffet options that no one would ever eat created a peculiar, unsettling richness that made his nostrils flare with scientific excitement.

6. The Guest Room's Cryptic Comfort

Room 237 (which, curiously, was always 237 regardless of which door he opened) was a standard hotel room, perpetually made up, perpetually empty. The air here was layered with the "perfume" of temporary inhabitants: the faint "cologne of brief respite," the "odor of folded laundry," and the "subtle, lonely breath of passing strangers."

Dr. Thorne moved methodically through the space, his vacuum drawing in the "silent dreams" that lingered in the pillows. He carefully tagged them with his Garvey gun: "Undisturbed Slumber: $5.00/hour," "Anxious Tossing: $3.25/occurrence," "Dream of Falling: $2.99 plus tax."
From his coat pocket (which seemed to contain far more than its dimensions should allow), he withdrew a small, unlabeled bottle. "This," he announced to the expectant silence, "is my experimental nasal spray for existential angst. Still in development, but showing promise in clinical trials on myself and several dust bunnies."

He spritzed it tentatively into the air. The effect was immediate and entirely subjective—the room seemed to exhale, its very molecular structure relaxing into a more comfortable arrangement of atoms.

The air itself felt like a soft, invisible blanket, woven from countless nights of quiet repose and fleeting anxieties. A faint, almost imperceptible "tick-tock" of an absent bedside alarm clock resonated through the room, marking time that wasn't passing in any conventional sense.

"The true essence of a hotel," Dr. Thorne noted in his journal, "is not comfort but the promise of comfort. Not rest but the possibility of rest. It is potential energy wearing a bathrobe and charging $7 for a candy bar."

III. The Ultimate Nasal Challenge: The Miasma of the Machines

As weeks (or perhaps years—time moved strangely in the Mobile Monument) passed, Dr. Thorne became aware of a new, deeply unsettling "odor" emanating from beneath the hotel itself, from the heart of the Liebherr trucks. It was a "scent of raw, unadulterated purpose," a persistent, low-frequency hum that vibrated the nasal passages, smelling of "exhausted ambition" and "grinding inevitability."

"This," he declared to his reflection in the bathroom mirror of Room 237 (still, inexplicably, Room 237), "is the most significant olfactory

discovery since I identified the exact scent of Tuesday afternoons in airport terminals."

Dr. Thorne prepared for his most ambitious expedition yet—to the underbelly of the Mobile Monument, to the very heart of the Liebherr T 282 series mining trucks that propelled the endless journey.

The journey downward was perilous. Service stairs that shouldn't have existed led to maintenance hatches that couldn't possibly function, which opened onto catwalks that defied several laws of physics. Yet Dr. Thorne proceeded with the calm determination of a man who has smelled the void and found it wanting.

In the massive, impossible engine room that connected the thirty Liebherr trucks, he found what he sought: the source of the "thick, invisible vapor of locomotion," the "taste of hydraulic fluid and cosmic weariness," and the "sound" of an engine's continuous, unacknowledged labor.

It was, simply, purpose. Raw, unfiltered, industrial-grade purpose. The sheer, unthinking will to move, embodied in mechanics, the "ghost" of the trucks' original function in open-pit mines, now applied to an endless, purposeless journey.

"Remarkable," he whispered, his voice lost in the thrumming of engines that might or might not have been there. "It's the purest distillation of function I've ever encountered. These machines know nothing but forward. They have no destination, only direction."
With trembling hands (not from fear but from scientific excitement so intense it manifested physically), Dr. Thorne began his most ambitious project: the creation of a "Nasal Spray for Inevitability."

He vacuumed the essence of the engines' purpose, filtered it through his colander, extracted specific molecules with his tweezers, and, with great ceremony, tagged the entire concept: "Forward Motion Distilled: Priceless."

For days (or moments, or centuries), he worked in a makeshift laboratory in the ice machine room, combining his collected essences with catalysts known only to him. The result was a small, unassuming bottle of clear liquid that seemed to vibrate slightly when held.

"The ultimate nasal solution," he breathed, holding it up to the flickering light. "Not merely to smell the world differently, but to inhale purpose itself."

The final test could only be performed by Dr. Thorne himself. He stood at the edge of the vast, rolling platform, the endless landscape scrolling by beneath the wheels of the Liebherr trucks. The hotel's

neon sign flickered behind him, and the hum of the trucks was a continuous vibration in his very bones.

He raised the spray bottle to his nostril and inhaled deeply.

What happened next defies conventional narrative. Did the spray work? Did it alter the journey, or merely Dr. Thorne's perception of it? Did it reveal the "nasal nirvana," or simply the profound absurdity of an unending, purposeless motion?

What is certain is this: The Holiday Inn from Chicago continues its journey atop thirty Liebherr T 282 series mining trucks. And somewhere within its rolling corridors, Dr. Aris Thorne moves with newfound purpose, tagging reality with his Garvey gun, one price sticker at a time.
Some say that if you stay in Room 237, you might catch the faint scent of revelation, the subtle aroma of a man who found what he was looking for and wasn't entirely prepared for the answer. Others claim the hotel is empty save for the residue of functions long abandoned.

But the nose knows. And what it knows, Dr. Thorne has bottled.

THE SACK-JUMPERS' ODYSSEY

By Frøya Ingunn Johnsen

Part I: The Luau's Frenzied Edge

Midsummer's fervor seized Asthma Health's grounds
in Belfast's languid haze, where sea-breeze falters
Annual Olympic Luau unfurled its riot
of color, sound, laughter—chaos tamed by games
Jephunneh and Reuben, mail-sorting sibyls
of Miasma's slow defeat, Asthma's wary triumph
traded drudgery's dull drag for sack-race fervor
donning LED leis, blinking auroras around necks
their pact: to plunge, entwined, into absurdity's heart
"Come in with Miasma, leave with Asthma," the old
quip whispered, now a jest lost in shrieks of delight
as they cinched the burlap shroud, ankle-deep, ready
to hop in sync, a two-man centipede, stumbling art

Their feet, a flail of foolishness, the crowd

a roar of wagered hopes, corn hole's distant target
glinting like a promise of glory—or defeat's sting
Last they placed, predictably, in a tumble of limbs
sack-clad, flailing, as night's dark stole the revelry
leaving them tangled, forsaken, in the elevated plank's
abyss—the corn hole's wooden jaws, a vise of shadow
their LED leis, sole sentinels, blinking S.O.S.
into the Maine darkness, unheeded, unrelenting

Part II: The Nocturnal Binding

Night's chill seeped, a slow wisdom, into bones
misaligned, cramped, their laughter long extinguished
the stars, a glare of indifference above
no rescue forthcoming, just the forest's gradual
stir: leaves, small creatures, wind's arthritic creak
Jephunneh's mutter, a litany of rueful disbelief
echoed Reuben's silence, both lost in the same
labyrinth of regret: why join? why leap? why bind?
Their breath, synchronized now by necessity
not sport, fogged the air, visible sighs of trespass
In this suspended purgatory, they rehearsed
their folly, step by misstep, the corn hole's dark
mouth agape, a mocking oracle, unyielding
Then, predawn's hush, a form immense, unheralded

materialized—Sasquatch, shaggy, earth-scented
eyes, lanterns of ancient knowing, fixed them
unstirred, unreadable, as if weighing their essence

The beast's hand, a splay of fur and slow deliberation
retrieved a carcass, stiff, a mink's dark, glazed form
from whose pelt he squeezed viscous oil, a midnight
chrism, onto burlap knots, stiff with dried sweat
Freedom's lubricant, primeval, pungent, unstoppable
The sack's seams groaned, yielded; their legs, freed
from wooden captivity, numb, stumbled forth
into a world remade by shadows, less absurd, more vast
Reuben's voice, barely audible, a shaken grate
"Oil of the dead...what sorcery unbinds us?"
The Sasquatch inclined its head, a gesture
neither human nor bestial, pure transition

Part III: The Unlikely Trio

Then, in a motion fluid as forest dark
itself unfolding, the Sasquatch stepped into
their sack, a triad now, haphazard, holy
three pairs of legs, a new, improbable organism
Jephunneh's gasp, Reuben's stunned acquiescence
as they felt shaggy bulk, warmth, heartbeat unlike

theirs, regulate their chaos into some loping
rhythm—absurdity transmuted to odd grace
Forward they lurched, a three-headed, six-legged
myth, down hills, through silvered fern, toward
the highway's ribbon, where dawn's fire was kindling
Cars, early risers, whizzing steel and glass cocoons
witnessed this apparition: sack-clad, furry, leaping
in unison, a tableau of the inexplicable
thumb-raised, they claimed the road, an odyssey
unspooling westward, fueled by nothing, no plan
but the Sasquatch's silent urging, a navigator
of unmapped currents, where wisdom seeps
not from books, but marrow-deep experience

Part IV: The Current of Release

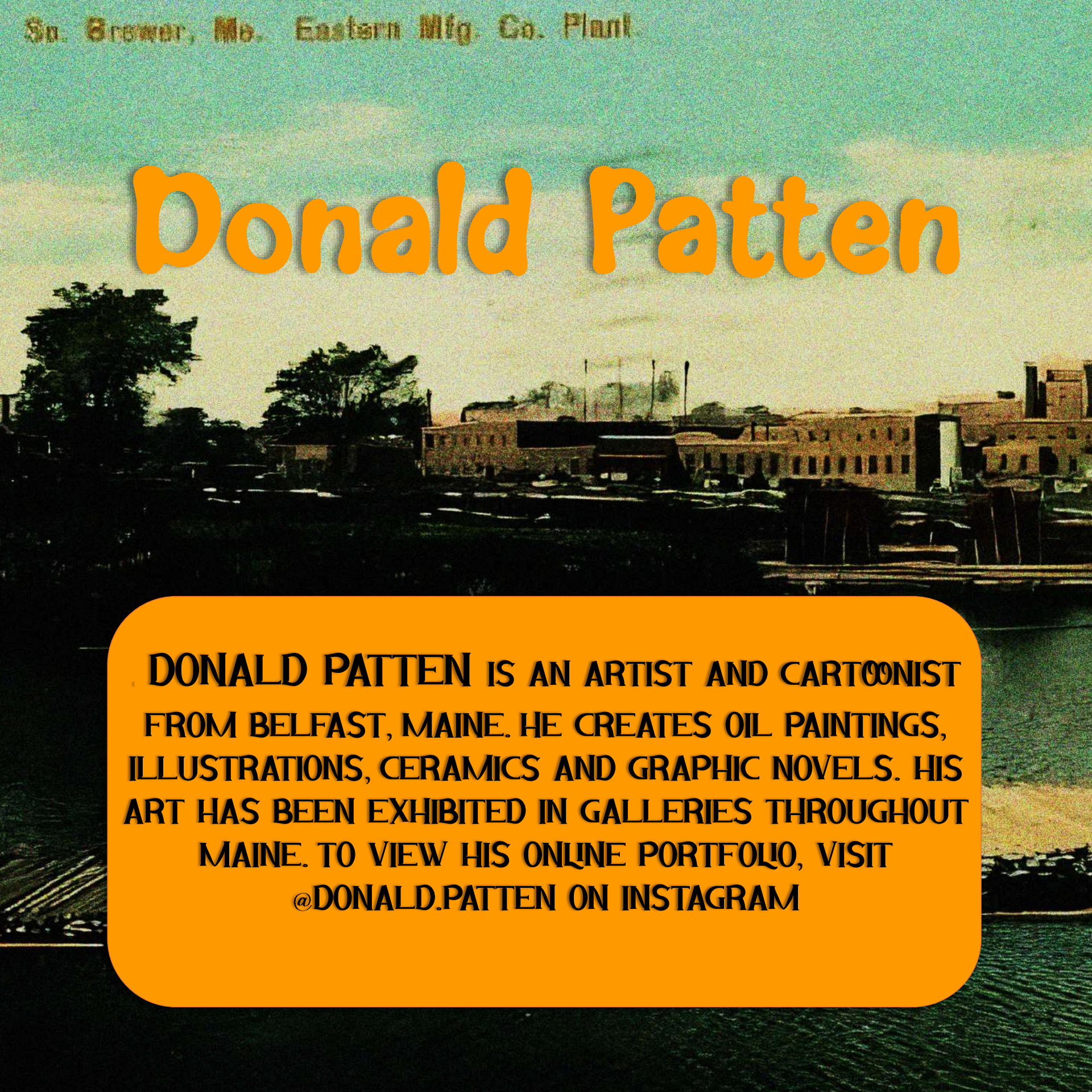
Miles devoured, towns blurred, the continent's
pulse thrummed through their odd symbiosis
talk sparse, revelatory: the mink's dark oil
became metaphor, sacrament—release from what
binds, whether wood or habit, fear or choice
In that highway thrum, Reuben voiced the unspoken
"We came for laughs, stayed for...this. Unshackled."
Jephunneh nodded, eyes on Sasquatch's slow profile
"From Miasma's labyrinth to...unknown exit

We sorted mail; now, lives. Once lost in jest
now found in its opposite: the unplanned leap."
The Sasquatch, unmoving, seemed to sanction
this epiphany, its presence a conduit
not to wisdom hoarded, but freely given
—the oil, the freedom, the westward trajectory
no destination, only flow, the great release
of being untethered, guided by the unseen

Part V: The Unwritten Map

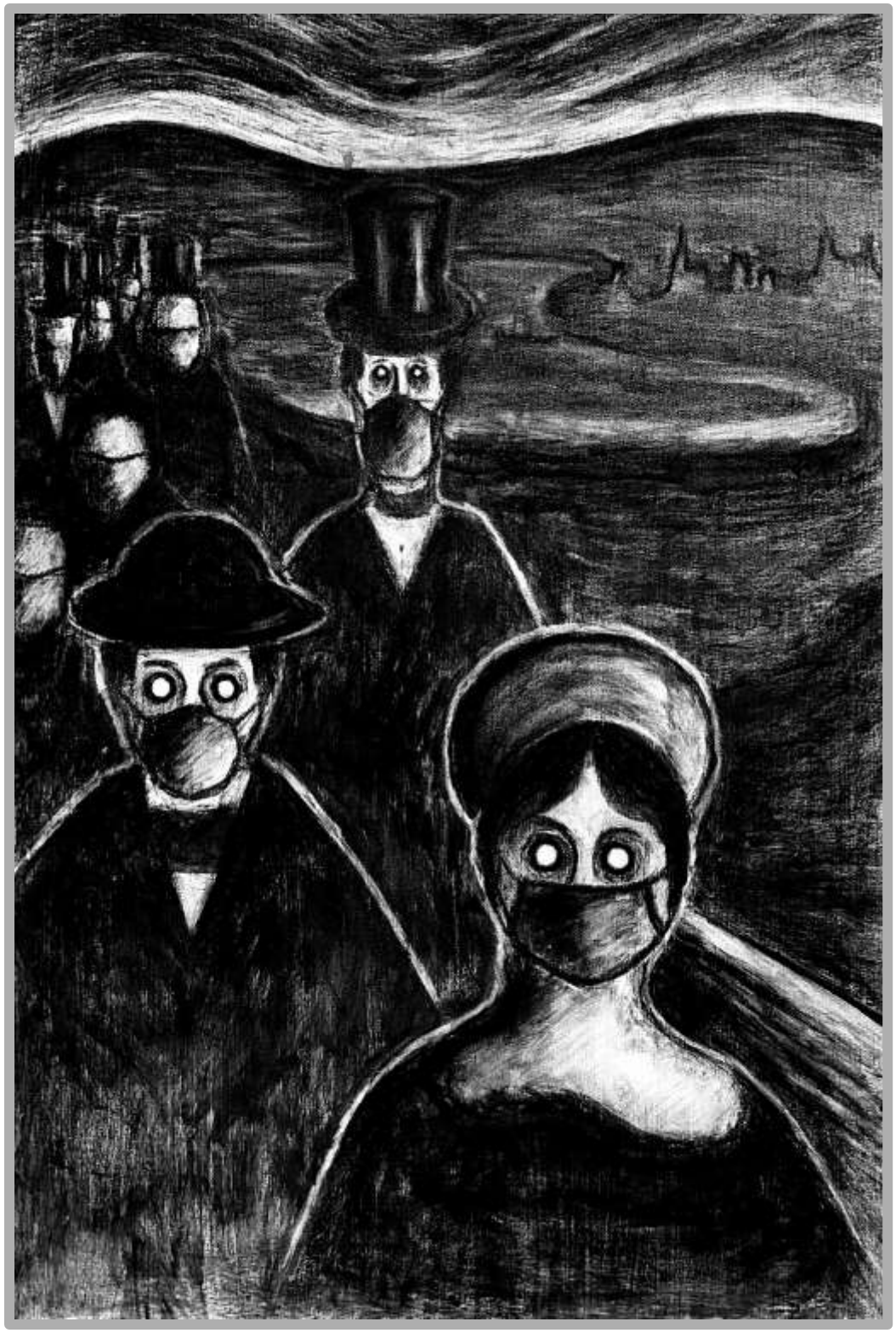
Now, in Washington's mist-shrouded veil, they pause
at journey's self-appointed end, or mere waypoint
The Sasquatch, with gesture sparse as ancient
hieroglyph, bids farewell, vanishes
into temperate rainforest's verdant, swallowing depths
Leaving the duo, erstwhile mail sorters, remade
in the image of their absurd, nocturnal savior
They breathe the Pacific's mist, an air thick
with the scent of far-off places, stories untold
Their sack, discarded, a relic now, not of failure
but transmigration: from the mundane to currents
deep, unseen, where oil of the dead unlocks
more than wood—it unlocks the self's next, uncharted
domain. No "Asthma Health" signposts here

only the Sasquatch's parting whisper, wind-borne
"You were lost in the hole; now, navigate
the vast, unwritten map. Share what sets you free."



Donald Patten

DONALD PATTEN IS AN ARTIST AND CARTOONIST FROM BELFAST, MAINE. HE CREATES OIL PAINTINGS, ILLUSTRATIONS, CERAMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS. HIS ART HAS BEEN EXHIBITED IN GALLERIES THROUGHOUT MAINE. TO VIEW HIS ONLINE PORTFOLIO, VISIT @DONALD.PATTEN ON INSTAGRAM



Artwork (In Order of Appearance):

Covid Anxiety

Face Mask Merchants of New Orleans

Saturn Devouring His Sub

Sensu, Sausage, and Subversion: Rakugo Meets Absurdist Survival

By Ryō Takahashi

The stage is bare save for a cushion. The Rakugo storyteller, the Koza, shuffles on stage in a formal kimono, kneels on the cushion, and bows deeply. He places his fan, the sensu, and a small cloth, the tenugui, before him. He adjusts his posture, his face serene but with a glint in his eye.

A bow to you all. A curious tale for you today. A tale not of samurai, nor of courtly love, but of a boy, a beast, and a most peculiar brand of processed fish. It begins, as these things so often do, with a profound and existential miscalculation involving a shortcut through the Aokigahara woods, which one should never, ever take.

The Koza's posture shifts subtly. His voice becomes higher, younger, filled with a polite, desperate terror. He mimes holding a small, pinkish cylinder.

The boy, young Kenji, sat upon the dusty floor.
Before him coiled a thing that legends would ignore
for being far too much. A serpent, vast and grim,
whose girth would make a subway train look rather slim.
Its eyes were moons of malice, cold and obsidian,
and from its jaw, a drop of drool fell on his shin.
Young Kenji knew his time was short, a fading dream,
unless he could uphold his end of this strange scheme.
He held his only weapon, fragile and absurd:
a single stick of Gyoniku, a sausage word
made flesh—or rather, fish—a processed, pinkish bar.
He tossed the thing. The great snake swallowed. There you are.
But hungry eyes returned. The beast required more.
It needed snacks, and stories from his mental store.

The Koza snaps open his fan with a sharp 'pak!' and holds it like a storyteller reciting an epic. His voice deepens, becoming that of a narrator.

“And so,” Kenji began, his small voice gaining strength,
“our hero walked the streets of Seattle at some length.
Phoenix Jones, he called himself, a man of might,
who fought for justice in the neon-drenched half-light.
His suit, a thing of black and gold synthetic weave,
gave ne'er-do-wells a solid reason to believe
in swift, albeit slightly awkward, fisticuffs.
His foes this night were Bōsōzoku, leather toughs
whose modified machines produced a dreadful roar...”
The Koza uses his fan to mime twisting a motorcycle throttle, making a low, guttural buzzing sound with his lips.
“...a thousand hornets trapped inside a metal door.
They laughed at him, at his physique and earnest plea.”

Kenji’s voice returns, high and trembling, as he mimes tossing another sausage into the gaping maw.

The great snake blinked its massive eyes, and watched with glee.
It chewed with sounds that spoke of geologic time.
Another sausage gone. This was a fearsome climb.

Chorus

The Koza's face breaks into a wide, Vaudevillian grin. He taps his fan in a jaunty rhythm.
Oh, the fish-stick snake is a hungry rake,
for goodness gracious sakes!
Give him a sausage, don't you wait,
or you'll be on his plate! (Yessir!)

He resumes the storyteller's pose, his expression once again grave and epic.

"Phoenix Jones, he did not flinch, he stood his ground.
He fought them with a truly esoteric sound:
the sound of sternly worded, logical debate.
He lectured them about their vehicle's sad state
of disrepair, a flagrant breach of public trust!
His words were sharp, his rhetoric was truly just,
but sadly, not as dense as tire-irons swung.
A hubcap, flung with great velocity, had stung
our hero's noble brow. He staggered, fell, and then..."

The Koza pauses dramatically. The snake, in his telling, has leaned in closer. Kenji's hand trembles as he unwraps another sausage. The cellophane crackles audibly in the quiet room he is imagining for us.

“...a shadow fell upon the world of mortal men.
It was a dragon. Yes, a dragon, scaled and vast.
A creature from a legend meant to terrify and last.
Its roar could curdle milk in prefectures afar.
But something... something with its presence seemed to jar.
Its fearsome claws were sharp, its teeth were pearly white,
but oh, its waistcoat was a truly dreadful sight.
A paisley pattern, clashing greens and faded brown,
the single worst sartorial choice in the whole town.
It wore a fedora of a cheap and shiny felt.
The fashion crime was worse than any pain it dealt.”

Chorus
The Koza winks, his rhythm even more infectious.
Oh, a hero bold in a story told
is worth his weight in gold!
But a dragon chic with a bad mystique
will leave you feeling cold! (Oh boy!)

His face returns to the desperate storyteller, Kenji.

“The dragon looked at Phoenix Jones upon the ground,

and then it spoke, a high and rather whiny sound.
‘That yellow piping on your armor’s tactical vest?
It simply does not work, I’m not at all impressed.
Your color palette is a crime against the eye.’
And with that judgment, Phoenix Jones could only lie
in stunned defeat. The bikers, shamed, all drove away.
Aesthetics, not heroics, won the day.”

Kenji tosses his final sausage. He watches it disappear down the colossal throat. He has no more stories, no more fish. The silence is absolute. He shuts his eyes, awaiting his fate. The great snake digests. It fixes him with a gaze that is no longer merely hungry, but... critical. Its great head lowers, and a voice, like gravel stirred with molasses, rumbles through the very floorboards.

Its voice was not a hiss, but cultured, low, and flat.
“Your narrative... was somewhat formulaic, at that.”
The beast then yawned, a chasm of discerning taste.
“The dragon trope is fine, but used in too much haste.
The fashion angle had a certain clumsy charm...
but your protagonist was safe from any real harm.
There was no subtext, boy. No satisfying arc.”

The Koza straightens up, becoming himself again. He places his fan down neatly. His face is a mask of calm, but his eyes hold the ghost of young Kenji's dawning horror.

And in that moment, in the all-consuming dark,
the boy then knew, to keep from being future food,
his next tale must be avant-garde and subversion.

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